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Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to Security Council resolutions 1886 (2009), 1941 (2010) and 2005 (2011), in which the Council requested the Secretary-General to submit a report on the activities of the United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone (UNIPSIL) every six months. The report covers the period from 1 September 2011 to 29 February 2012.

II. Major developments

2. During the reporting period, the political situation in the country was dominated by preparations for the presidential, parliamentary and local council elections, which are scheduled to be held on 17 November 2012. The period also witnessed an increase in political tensions mainly involving supporters of the ruling All People's Congress (APC) and the major opposition party, the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP). There were, however, some positive socio-economic developments in the country, primarily as a result of the increased exploitation of the country's abundant natural resources, notably minerals.

A. Political developments

3. Political tensions surrounding the 2012 elections increased during the reporting period. On 9 September 2011, a convoy carrying Brigadier Julius Maada Bio (Rtd), the SLPP presidential candidate, was attacked by APC supporters in Bo, in the southern region, resulting in injuries to him. On the same day, SLPP supporters set fire to the APC district office and two residential properties belonging to APC supporters in Bo. As the Sierra Leone Police attempted to control the situation, one person was killed, and several people, including the Chair of the ruling party's regional women's wing, were injured in the violence. On 10 September, the President of Sierra Leone, Ernest Bai Koroma, condemned the violence and announced the establishment of an independent investigation panel composed of civil society organizations in Sierra Leone and the security services to investigate the incident. On 31 September, the panel concluded that supporters of both parties were complicit in the violence. The panel also made recommendations

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aimed at improving the work of the police and fostering a stronger sense of accountability among political parties. Shortly after the submission of the panel's report, criminal proceedings were initiated against supporters of both parties who were accused of being involved in the incident.

4. Following the attack on 9 September, the Inspector General of Police imposed a ban on all political party processions and rallies in the country. The ban was lifted on 12 December, after the signing of a memorandum of understanding by APC, the People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC), the People's Liberation Party (PLP) and the United Democratic Movement (UDM), which committed the political parties to engaging in regular consultations with the police; deploying marshals during political party processions; and strictly adhering to the code of conduct for political parties and the Public Order Act. SLPP and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) did not sign the memorandum because the Inspector General of Police had chaired the meeting at which the document was signed, instead of the head of the Political Parties Registration Commission. They also insisted that the police had no legal authority to ban political party processions and rallies.

5. On 14 January 2012, clashes erupted again between supporters of APC and SLPP during a local council by-election in Freetown. The police fired tear gas to disperse supporters from both parties who were throwing stones in the streets. The incident resulted in injuries to four people. During those incidents, UNIPSIL, in collaboration with the Political Parties Registration Commission, maintained close contact with the leadership of SLPP and APC, urging them to encourage their supporters to exercise maximum restraint in the course of their political activities. The United Nations also provided logistical support to the panel members investigating the 9 September incident.

6. In his address at the fifth State Opening of Parliament, on 7 October 2011, President Koroma highlighted the achievements of his administration over the past four years and outlined his vision for the long-term development and transformation of Sierra Leone. He underlined the fact that SLPP, APC and PMDC, the third party represented in Parliament, were all partners in the transformation of the country and had much in common. The President gave assurances of the Government's determination to ensure free, fair, transparent and peaceful elections in 2012. However, parliamentarians from SLPP and PMDC boycotted the State Opening of Parliament, protesting, among other things, against the ban on political processions and rallies imposed by the police following the political violence on 9 September in Bo.

7. On 7 February, the SLPP presidential candidate issued a press statement accusing the ruling party, APC, of rearming and deploying ex-combatants to the southern and eastern provinces, which are the strongholds of SLPP, in order to increase votes for the ruling party and foment violence. The Government denied the allegations and accused SLPP of inciting violence. On 10 February, the police launched an investigation into allegations made by SLPP and invited Brigadier Bio (Rtd) to substantiate the allegations contained in his press statement in order to facilitate the investigations.

8. From 20 January to 1 February, the Government of Sierra Leone held a national conference on the development and transformation of the country. In his statement to the conference, President Koroma called on Sierra Leonean citizens to maximize the opportunities presented to the country through increased mining

revenues. At the conclusion of the conference, declarations were adopted on key thematic areas, such as political and economic governance; private sector development; natural resource management; support of the Sierra Leonean diaspora; accountability; and frameworks for the exploitation of natural resources and allocation of state resources. The SLPP did not participate in the event, citing, among other reasons, the conference's proximity to the elections. The United Nations provided funding and technical support for the conference.

Preparations for the 2012 elections

Voter registration

9. In preparation for the elections, some 800 biometric voter registration kits were procured by the National Electoral Commission, with assistance from an election basket fund managed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The upcoming elections mark the first time voter registration in Sierra Leone will be undertaken using the biometric system. The Commission conducted a pilot test of the system from 1 to 3 November 2011 and also undertook sensitization programmes throughout the country to raise awareness of the biometric system. The Commission also held a series of meetings between 28 October 2011 and 20 January 2012 with all political parties to elaborate on registration procedures and other technical issues associated with the biometric system. The United Nations assisted the Commission in developing training manuals and guides for administering the biometric system.

10. The voter registration exercise began on 23 January 2012 and will end on 26 March 2012. There are 2,998 registration centres distributed among 394 wards, and the registration period in each ward is 15 days. The number of registered voters for the elections is expected to be 3.2 million, which represents an estimated increase of about 700,000 over the 2007 elections. As at 4 March, 1,888,028 persons had registered using the biometric system.

Electoral legal reform

11. The electoral legal reform process, which began in March 2011, continued during the reporting period. A technical committee composed of representatives of the Law Reform Commission, the Political Parties Registration Commission, the National Electoral Commission and UNIPSIL completed a review of the recommendations made by political parties, national stakeholders and civil society during an electoral legal reform workshop held in March 2011. The reviewed recommendations relate to the announcement of dates for public elections, eligibility criteria for election to the office of President, the tenure of Commissioners, election petitions and decisions and the nullification of votes. In addition, the technical committee consolidated all electoral legislation into one single compendium for ease of reference. The proposed electoral legislation is expected to be approved by Parliament in March 2012.

12. While most political parties have expressed agreement with the main proposals for electoral legal reform, SLPP has challenged the provision that would grant powers to the National Electoral Commission to nullify votes. The absence of legislation on the nullification of votes generated much controversy during the 2007 run-off presidential elections and was consequently a subject of contention between the National Electoral Commission and SLPP; against that background, UNIPSIL

and the Political Parties Registration Commission held several rounds of consultations with SLPP during the reporting period, with a view to arriving at a consensus on the proposals for the nullification of votes. The discussions remain inconclusive, with SLPP maintaining its position.

Election Steering Committee

13. During the period under review, my Executive Representative and the Minister for Finance and Economic Development co-chaired meetings of the Election Steering Committee, which were attended by international development partners and representatives of national election management bodies. The meetings were aimed at ensuring the proper coordination of arrangements for the elections. At the meeting held on 15 September, the Government announced that its contributions to the elections would be approximately $18 million.

Election security arrangements

14. In view of the potential risks of electoral violence and other security-related challenges, national security sector agencies in Sierra Leone developed, with assistance from UNIPSIL, a comprehensive threat assessment and an integrated election strategy, which will guide their operations during the electoral process. In addition, UNDP and UNIPSIL assisted in the preparation of training modules for the police on a range of issues, including the electoral law and applicable standards of professionalism in the conduct of their duties. The police also completed a train-the-trainer programme.

Support to civil society, non-State actors and the implementation of the joint communiqué of 2 April

15. The engagement of civil society and other non-State actors in creating an enabling environment for the peaceful conduct of elections is critical in the lead-up to the elections. To that end, and with support from the Peacebuilding Fund, UNIPSIL developed a non-State actors project that seeks to promote dialogue and participation among political actors, while enhancing the capacity of key non-State actors in the areas of conflict mitigation and resolution. The project's activities have included periodic meetings of district code of conduct monitoring committees, composed of representatives of political parties, civil society, security agencies and local authorities. The committees have provided a mechanism to anticipate and resolve issues related to the electoral process and have facilitated interaction among the political parties, which has led to a reduction in tensions in several communities. On 24 January, a national meeting of committee members was convened in Freetown to take stock of and consolidate the gains made by the committees at the district level.

16. In order to boost efforts aimed at instilling the shared values of political tolerance and non-violence, further support from the non-State actors project was provided to the All Political Parties Youth Association and the All Political Parties Women's Association. Some 200 members of the Youth Association were also trained by the Political Parties Registration Commission in advocacy and leadership during the reporting period.

17. A number of outreach activities aimed at promoting political dialogue, participation and non-violence were undertaken by UNIPSIL through the non-State

actors project during the reporting period. The joint communiqué signed by SLPP and APC on 2 April 2009 following inter-party violence in March 2009 was widely disseminated throughout the country by means of short films. In addition, Sierra Leonean musicians, under the banner of Artists for Peace, continued to advocate for peace and non-violence through music concerts in various parts of the country.

B. Security developments

18. The overall security situation in Sierra Leone remained relatively calm during the reporting period despite isolated incidents of election-related violence. On 8 September 2011, President Koroma launched a national security exercise and the second security sector review in Freetown. Both activities were designed to raise awareness of the country's national security architecture and identify areas that require further improvement.

19. While there were no reports of organized arms trafficking in Sierra Leone during the reporting period, there were reports of an increase in the illegal trade in shotgun cartridges and the illegal use of locally manufactured shotguns. Both activities need to be monitored closely, especially in the lead-up to the elections. The early adoption of the arms and ammunition bill, which is currently being reviewed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, will contribute to national efforts to curb the illegal trade in arms and ammunition. The bill is also in line with the Economic Community of West African States Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, Their Ammunition and Other Related Materials.

C. Economic and social developments and activities of the United Nations country team

20. During the period under review, the economy of Sierra Leone continued to expand. The outlook for the economy in the medium term remains favourable. According to forecasts by the International Monetary Fund, real GDP growth is projected at 5.3 per cent for 2011, and the economy is expected to experience a one-time jump in growth to 51.4 per cent in 2012, owing mainly to the commencement of iron ore production. Economic growth is expected to average 6 per cent from 2013 to 2015. The quantity of iron ore exported by African Minerals Limited, which began exporting in December 2011, is expected to reach 15 million tons in 2012, which will contribute an estimated $57 million to Government revenue.

21. Although the rate of inflation reached a high of 21 per cent in the first half of 2011, preliminary figures show a decline to 16.9 per cent at the end of December 2011, which reflects a tight monetary policy and a relatively stable exchange rate. It should be noted that the Sierra Leone currency, the leone, depreciated relative to the United States dollar by just under 5 per cent in 2011. While fiscal challenges remain, including containment of the wage bill and other current spending, as well as better scheduling of infrastructure spending, anticipated improvements in revenue mobilization will help to keep the overall fiscal deficit at 4.4 per cent of non-iron ore GDP in 2012. The external balance of payments remains favourable, and gross reserves are expected to average about $386 million a year (or the equivalent of three months of imports of non-iron ore goods and services) in 2012 and 2013.

External debt, which is projected at 20 per cent of GDP in 2012, is expected to remain low.

22. Following consultations with the Governments of Sierra Leone and Liberia, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) announced in January that it would invoke, as from 30 June 2012, the "ceased circumstances" clauses of the Geneva Convention and the Organization of African Unity Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa with respect to the 8,188 Liberian refugees still residing in Sierra Leone. Although the invocation will decidedly terminate their refugee status, UNHCR will work with the two Governments concerned to afford the individuals an opportunity to opt for local integration or voluntary repatriation.

23. The Free Health Care Initiative for children under 5 years of age, pregnant women and lactating mothers, an initiative supported by the United Nations Children's Fund, the Department for International Development of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and other donors, has contributed to an increase in the utilization of treatment services, antenatal care and childbirth in health facilities. Child mortality remains high, however, owing mainly to malnutrition, late vaccinations, malaria and diarrhoea. While maternal mortality continues to decline, its prevalence remains relatively high, exacerbated by teenage pregnancy and inadequate access to health services. Gender gaps have significantly narrowed in primary education but persist in secondary schools.

III. Advancing peacebuilding

24. The midterm review of the Joint Vision Strategy was completed in September 2011, following consultations with the Government. The review highlighted the United Nations contribution to the implementation of the Government's Agenda for Change and provided direction towards a programmatic approach that would allow for greater synergies and more flexibility in United Nations interventions. The United Nations country team is finalizing a draft transitional joint vision that will cover 2013 and 2014. That strategy will be implemented through an interim two-year programme cycle (2013-2014) and will take into account the 2012 elections in the country. The longer-term national strategy is expected to be fully developed in 2013. In the meantime, the United Nations system will continue to align its strategy with the sectoral strategies of Government ministries, departments and agencies. Consultations with the Government are ongoing with respect to the transitional joint vision, which focuses on seven programmatic clusters that are aligned with the draft national strategy. The clusters include support to good governance; agriculture and food security; natural resources and disaster management; social protection, child protection, gender and human rights; basic education; health and nutrition; and economic development and employment.

25. From 22 to 29 January, the newly appointed Chair of the Sierra Leone configuration of the Peacebuilding Commission, Guillermo Rishchynshi (Canada), visited Sierra Leone to assess the progress made in consolidating the peace process and in preparing for the 2012 elections. He held meetings with a wide range of stakeholders, including President Koroma, the Ministers for Foreign Affairs, Finance and Economic Development, Youth Employment and Sports, and Mineral Resources, the Speaker of Parliament, the Youth Commissioner, the country's

electoral management bodies and representatives of political parties, as well as civil society and international development partners. During that visit, the Chair strongly encouraged political parties to work towards the success of the 2012 elections, stressing the primacy of national reconciliation and peaceful political dialogue.

IV. Main risks to peacebuilding

A. Illicit drug trafficking and organized crime

26. The Sierra Leone Transnational Organized Crime Unit continued to make progress in combating drug trafficking and organized crime with the support of its West Africa Coast Initiative partners. The Unit investigated 113 cases involving drug, human and arms trafficking, as well as financial crimes. Furthermore, 68 drug-related cases, 3 cases of financial crimes and 1 case of human trafficking were referred to the courts. Some 112 suspects were indicted and 8 convictions secured during the reporting period.

27. Regarding illicit drugs, in 2011 the Transnational Organized Crime Unit impounded 1,748 kg and destroyed 128 kg of *cannabis sativa* and arrested six suspects on possession- and trafficking-related charges. UNIPSIL provided technical support to the Unit in developing procedures for its operations, in international cooperation and in intelligence gathering. The operational capability of the Unit was also strengthened with training provided by UNIPSIL and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime on entry tactics and intelligence analysis.

28. During the reporting period, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime conducted an assessment of the national forensic capacity of Sierra Leone and is supporting the construction of a new forensic laboratory to strengthen it.

B. Youth

29. The National Youth Commission was inaugurated by President Koroma on 25 November 2011. The Commission is expected to take the lead in promoting and harmonizing youth development, within the framework of the Ministry of Youth Employment and Sports. It will give voice to young people by serving as a forum that ensures policy coherence and promotes youth interest in Government policies. Youth issues have been prioritized and are being mainstreamed in the draft employment policy, which is expected to be approved by Parliament in 2012.

C. Corruption

30. The 2011 Corruption Perceptions Index by Transparency International, released on 1 December 2011, revealed that the ranking of Sierra Leone had improved slightly, from 2.4 points in 2010 to 2.5 points in 2011. This is partially attributable to efforts of the Anti-Corruption Commission, which continues to initiate investigations and prosecute public officials involved in corrupt practices. During the period under review, the Mayor of Freetown, a member of the ruling party, was indicted for alleged acts of corruption. The Mayor has since been suspended from office, pending the outcome of the court proceedings.

31. With assistance from UNDP and funding from the Peacebuilding Fund, the Anti-Corruption Commission established a secretariat to manage the implementation of the National Anti-Corruption Strategy. The secretariat is also supporting public sector agencies in developing action plans for the implementation of the Strategy. UNDP is also providing support to an initiative by the Commission, civil society and the media to promote the Strategy and monitor its implementation nationwide.

V. Support to democratic institutions

A. National Electoral Commission

32. The National Electoral Commission took several positive initiatives aimed at strengthening national ownership of the electoral process during the period under review. Apart from playing the lead role in defining the parameters for the biometric voter registration and reform of the electoral law, the Commission publicly piloted the biometric voter registration system. Throughout 2011, it administered by-elections without international support.

33. While its capacities have been strengthened over time, the National Electoral Commission still requires international technical support, given the complexity of new elements introduced in the 2012 electoral process, particularly the biometric voter registration system. Such support and constructive engagement by the international community will assist the Commission in overcoming the challenges of managing the 2012 electoral process. During the reporting period, the Commission continued to receive technical and financial assistance from the UNDP-managed election basket fund.

B. Political Parties Registration Commission

34. The Political Parties Registration Commission continues to play an important role in regulating the activities of political parties, especially in ensuring their adherence to the code of conduct for political parties. This task has become even more critical, given the prevailing environment of mutual mistrust among the major political parties. The Commission also plays a lead role in advancing dialogue among the political parties and implementing Peacebuilding Fund projects aimed at supporting political parties, the All Political Parties Youth Association, the All Political Parties Women's Association and the district code monitoring committees. Under the UNIPSIL non-State actor project, the Commission continued to play a key role in implementing programmes to build the conflict mitigation and resolution capacities of political parties, including their women's and youth wings. During the period under review, it received logistical support, including computers, vehicles and office equipment from the UNDP-managed election basket fund.

35. On 5 September 2011, the Political Parties Registration Commission convened a legal reform workshop, during which participants reviewed the Commission's mandate and recommended, inter alia, revisions to the Political Parties Act of 2002 so as to give the Commission statutory authority to enforce the code of conduct for political parties.

36. During the reporting period, the Political Parties Registration Commission approved the registration of four new political parties to participate in the electoral process. These are the United Democratic Movement (UDM), the Peace and Liberation Party (PLP), the Citizen's Democratic Party (CDP) and the Revolutionary United Front Party (RUFP).

C. Independent Media Commission

37. Given the increasing polarization of the media coverage and political landscape in Sierra Leone ahead of the elections, the Independent Media Commission is expected to play a more proactive role in monitoring the media and ensuring compliance with the code of conduct for the media. During the reporting period, the Commission received capacity-building assistance from the Government and international partners, which further enhanced its ability to monitor radio stations and newspapers to ensure compliance with the media code of ethics. The Commission also provided training for media practitioners on electoral reporting ethics, legal reforms and other obligations of broadcast media under the Sierra Leone media code of practice.

D. Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation

38. The upcoming elections will provide the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation with an opportunity to assert its credentials as a credible and impartial public independent broadcaster. During the reporting period, the Corporation continued its efforts to provide good programming and afford opportunities to all stakeholders to air their views. However, it continued to face administrative and financial management challenges, which were highlighted in a report submitted by a presidential commission of inquiry to President Koroma in November 2011. The report contained recommendations aimed at addressing those deficits, including the need to clarify the powers of the Corporation's Board of Trustees and Management, change the eligibility criteria for membership in the Board and ensure a transparent and competitive recruitment process for senior positions within the Corporation.

39. During the reporting period, transmitters procured by the United Nations were installed at various regional locations in Pujehun and Kono Districts, which will improve the Corporation's outreach. In the meantime, in order to ensure a level playing field in the lead-up to the elections, the Corporation has pledged to provide equal airtime to all political parties during the electoral process.

E. Parliament

40. With the support of the United Nations, the Sierra Leone Parliament has now established eight departments, which were envisaged under the Parliamentary Service Act 2007. In addition, the United Nations provided technical support, including for mapping exercises of interventions by development partners and preparation of the terms of reference for the establishment of the Parliamentary Assistance Coordination Office, which will assist in preventing any duplication of programmes supported by development partners. The United Nations also continues

to support the work of the Parliamentary Human Rights Committee by providing training and reference materials for the Parliament's library.

F. Decentralization

41. Efforts to strengthen governance and rule of law institutions at all levels, in particular at the local level, are proceeding satisfactorily. Many challenges remain, however, including those relating to the expected role of national actors at the local level. To address those challenges, a policy framework is being developed by the Government with a view to revising the Local Government Act and the new chieftaincy and traditional administration policy. Those instruments, together with the decentralization policy, clarify the roles and responsibilities of the local councils, district officers, parliamentarians and traditional authorities in the areas of decision-making with regard to development; elections and maintenance of law and order; and local revenue collection and allocation. United Nations support will continue to focus on service delivery programmes; the introduction of a local economic development process; and capacity development for chieftaincy administration.

VI. Human rights and the rule of law

42. Together with the Government, the Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone and civil society, UNIPSIL participated in the universal periodic review process, which resulted in the adoption of the universal periodic review report on Sierra Leone at the eighteenth session of the Human Rights Council, held in Geneva in September 2011. The Government accepted all 129 recommendations from the review process with the exception of 1 recommendation relating to homosexual and lesbian rights. In addition, UNIPSIL supported the convening of a national conference that reviewed the recommendations from the universal periodic review process and agreed on priorities and strategies for their implementation. Following the adoption of the conference report, the Presidency issued a directive to all ministries and departments to mainstream the recommendations from the universal period review in their programmes.

43. The Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone also made some progress in the implementation of its mandate. In December 2011, the first five-year renewable term of the Commissioners and the strategic plan for the period 2009-2011 ended. Two of the former Commissioners have since been reappointed to a second term, while the process to fill the other three positions is ongoing. As a result of the engagement of UNIPSIL with civil society and its support to district human rights committees, several chiefdoms have now formed chiefdom human rights subcommittees to promote and protect human rights in rural communities.

44. UNIPSIL, in collaboration with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, conducted extensive research and in December 2011 issued a report on the rights of persons with disabilities aimed at supporting Government efforts to implement the Persons with Disability Act 2011. The Government has responded positively to some of the recommendations contained in the report, in particular the need to fast-track the establishment of a national commission for persons with disabilities.

45. During the period under review, the justice sector coordination forums established by UNIPSIL to assist justice sector stakeholders in devising practical strategies for improving justice delivery continued their work, which was aimed at improving detention conditions, securing the release of juveniles detained with adults, fast-tracking the hearing of cases in courts and reducing the number of arbitrary arrests by the police.

VII. Gender issues

46. During the period under review, a gender equality bill containing provisions pertaining to quotas for women recommended by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was drafted by a coalition of women's advocacy groups known as the Women's Social Support Group. The bill, which will be tabled before Parliament, provides that a minimum of 30 per cent of seats in Parliament shall be reserved for women; that one ward in each constituency at the local council level shall be set aside for female candidates; and that political parties shall allocate "safe" seats for female candidates. A 30 per cent quota would also apply to the appointment of senior officials, particularly those at the ministerial and ambassadorial levels, as well as those in parastatal organizations and other Government institutions. The bill was presented to President Koroma on 12 January 2012.

47. United Nations entities took several steps to advance the rights of women and the girl child. UNDP provided assistance to a victim support scheme and to "Saturday courts", which adjudicate sexual and gender-based violence. The United Nations also supported the establishment of mobile courts to adjudicate on cases of sexual and gender-based violence in the southern region of the country. In addition, training was provided to 260 police officers from the Sierra Leone Police Family Support Unit on guidelines for the management of such cases. In December 2011, training programmes on the promotion of the rule of law and the dispensation of justice for women were conducted for 300 local court clerks and 150 paramount chiefs.

48. My Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Margot Wallström, visited Sierra Leone in November 2011. During her interactions with a range of stakeholders, she highlighted the need for more support to survivors of sexual violence, especially in the areas of access to justice and reintegration into society, as well as the need to strengthen the capacity of the judicial system to address sexual violence. On 28 September 2011, the United Nations organized an Open Day, which focused on discussions related to Security Council resolutions 1325 (2000) and 1820 (2008). Some 200 women representing peace activists, including Government functionaries, traditional leaders and members of Parliament, attended the meeting.

VIII. Special Court for Sierra Leone

49. At the end of 2011, as a result of difficulties in obtaining voluntary contributions, the Special Court received a subvention from the General Assembly of over $9 million to cover its 2012 budget.

50. The Special Court is awaiting the delivery of the trial judgement concerning the former President of Liberia, Charles Taylor, at The Hague, which is expected to

take place on 26 April 2012. In addition, two contempt cases against five individuals accused of interfering with witnesses involved in the trial will resume after the delivery of the judgement in the trial of Charles Taylor. The Court continues to make preparations for its transition to the Residual Special Court for Sierra Leone, the liquidation of its assets and the handover of its site.

IX. Regional cooperation

51. On 13 October 2011, President Koroma visited Guinea and held talks with its President, Alpha Condé, on strengthening relations between the two countries and on regional issues of common interest. In a communiqué issued after the summit, the two Presidents reaffirmed their desire to continue to work together to strengthen the bilateral cooperation existing between the two countries. They also reaffirmed their commitment to expeditiously resolving the Yenga boundary issue through diplomatic means.

X. Observations and recommendations

52. Ten years have passed since the decade-long civil war in Sierra Leone officially ended in January 2002. The country has made considerable progress in consolidating its hard-won peace and in laying the foundations for a better future for its citizens. However, it continues to grapple with governance issues and developmental challenges, all of which can be addressed and resolved only in an atmosphere of peace and stability. In this endeavour, the political leaders of the country have the biggest responsibility to nurture and promote a culture of political tolerance and accommodation.

53. The presidential, parliamentary and local council elections planned for 2012 will therefore remain a vital test to assess the level of the consolidation of peace in the country. It also affords an opportunity for all national stakeholders to demonstrate their commitment to the consolidation of democracy in the country. However, recent incidents of political violence in the country continue to raise concerns about the prospects for a peaceful conduct of the 2012 elections. These incidents must not be allowed to escalate any further. Clearly, the ruling party and the opposition party, given their dominant roles in the politics of the country, must put aside partisan political interests in favour of the overriding national interests and development.

54. In this regard, I urge the political parties of Sierra Leone to take ownership of the dialogue process. I appeal to all the political stakeholders in the country, who in the past showed much resilience and resolve to bring an unfortunate past to an end, to once again rise to the challenge of consolidating democratic freedoms in Sierra Leone. It remains my hope that there will be a resumption of dialogue among the parties, geared towards furthering national cohesion and ensuring the peaceful conduct of elections. Nothing can be more urgent in Sierra Leone than the maintenance of peace, security and stability in the country.

55. I commend the Government for the arrest and prosecution of individuals who are implicated in incidents of political violence, irrespective of their affiliation. I call upon the political parties to reaffirm their commitments, which they made in the

joint communiqué of 2 April, and to abide by the code of conduct for political parties. The release of the long-awaited white paper on the Shears-Moses Commission of Inquiry into the March 2009 disturbances and the implementation of the Commission's recommendations would also contribute to lowering the political temperature in the country and building confidence among the political actors of Sierra Leone.

56. On the basis of current economic projections, Sierra Leone is expected to witness increases in its GDP, mostly from the export of its natural resources in the coming years. I welcome these positive developments, which are likely to have a direct impact on improving the livelihoods of the people of Sierra Leone. I commend the Government's efforts to build consensus among national stakeholders on the country's long-term strategic direction through the recently concluded Sierra Leone Conference on Development and Transformation. I am also encouraged by the Government's recent pronouncements to the effect that anticipated revenues will be utilized for the benefit of all Sierra Leoneans.

57. The country's democratic institutions, the National Electoral Commission, the Political Parties Registration Commission, the Independent Media Commission and other institutions, including the Sierra Leone Police and the judiciary, have important responsibilities in ensuring credible and peaceful elections in 2012. In line with the recommendations from the universal periodic review process and in accordance with the joint communiqué of 2 April, I encourage the Government to proceed with the establishment of an Independent Police Complaints Committee, which would reinforce the neutrality and professionalism of the police. I also urge international development partners of Sierra Leone to support the Government in establishing this Committee.

58. The media in Sierra Leone have an important role to play, not only in raising awareness of the electoral process but also in promoting national unity and cohesion. It is important that the Independent Media Commission, the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists and other media organizations work together in enhancing the positive role that the media are expected to play before, during and after the 2012 elections. In this regard, efforts to strengthen the revised Media Code of Conduct are essential.

59. I wish to express my appreciation for the continuing support of the Peacebuilding Commission to Sierra Leone and would like to encourage the Commission to intensify its efforts in support of the electoral process in the country, while strengthening its coordination with relevant United Nations departments, funds, agencies and programmes. I also encourage the Commission to provide timely advice to the Security Council, as deemed necessary, for its consideration.

60. On measures to implement Security Council resolution 1325 (2000), I am pleased to note that a strong foundation has been laid for the participation of women in governance in Sierra Leone, through the proposed gender equality bill, which includes key recommendations from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I commend the Government and the various women's groups and coalitions for their efforts in this regard and pledge the continuing support of the United Nations in furthering this objective. Preventing violence against women during the electoral period is an important objective that should be pursued by all stakeholders.

61. In conclusion, I would like to thank President Koroma and his Government for their cooperation with UNIPSIL in the implementation of its mandate. I also wish to convey my sincere appreciation to the staff of the United Nations in Sierra Leone for their hard work and dedication, which has contributed to the progress of the country. I thank the international development partners of Sierra Leone and the African Development Bank, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund for their continued support to the country and the United Nations. Finally, I would like once again to express my deep appreciation to my outgoing Executive Representative, Michael von der Schulenburg, for his full commitment and excellent service in advancing the peacebuilding process and strengthening the presence of the United Nations in Sierra Leone.